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ABSTRACT

The papers from the 1982 conference on Pennsylvania's Long Range Plan for School Improvement (LRPSI) assist in constructing reality about LRPSI itself. Focusing on the program's registration phase, Charles Gorman offers an alternative proposal, linking registration and evaluation, that would contribute to improving schools and increasing public confidence. Examining the context of declining student enrollment affecting most schools, James Burk proposes areas of collaboration through which school districts could lessen the constraints declining enrollment otherwise imposes. John DeFlaminis and Robert Nicely emphasize the interdependent nature of LRPSI processes and the importance of instructional improvement as well as curriculum change. Like DeFlaminis and Nicely, Richard Wallace recognizes the need for an ongoing relationship between technical assistants and the school district. Wallace also suggests the need for strong instructional leadership by administrators and for greater sensitivity to people and developmental processes in attempting to effect change. All the participants' papers indicate to what extent knowledge is mediated by frames of reference. School board members and teachers, for example, are likely to assess the same situation from very different points of view. Being sensitive to such differences is critical to school improvement planning and to efforts to restore public confidence in the schools. (JBM)

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A KNOWLEDGE USE PERSPECTIVE:
COMMENTS ON A CONFERENCE

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The Long Range Planning for School Improvement conference provided an opportunity for persons from school districts to meet with each other in discussion groups led by persons experienced in LRPSI activities. Discussion leaders focused their attention on special issues relevant to LRPSI. By having simultaneous but repeated discussion sections, participants could not only attend each special discussion but could do so with different mixes of fellow participants. Since participants were encouraged to interact with the discussion leader and with their peers, the conference could be characterized as a process of "collective intelligencing."¹ By this it is meant that the conference was not a "how to do" LRPSI workshop but rather a discussion about "how to think" about LRPSI as a whole and various issues that arise in undertaking planning and planned action.

LRPSI in the Context of Change Strategies

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Since the social reform era of the 1960's and 1970's, there have been several dominant themes pervading most organized activities in the public sector of our society. One has been the belief that we can consciously examine the way in which we pursue organizational activities and relate these to goal attainment. A second is that we can improve our goal attainment by increasing our use of knowledge about what methods are currently being used for goal attainment, and what changes or innovations might be introduced as means to improve goal attainment. That is, we can specifically target change efforts. A third theme has been that the process of reflection and

¹In private communication with the late Paul F. Lazarsfeld, he coined this term to refer to the interpretation of a guideline or assignment that recipients do collaboratively with one another in the absence of the person or persons who prepared it, as for example, students conferring with each other regarding the intentions of the professor.

decision-making should be made accessible to those with vested interests. This theme was manifested in the Freedom of Information and Sunshine Laws, for example. This is the broad sociocultural context in which activities to effect improvement in the public sector institutions are taking place. When the reform movement got underway, there was an expanding economy, tremendous confidence that professional practice could be improved by increasing its scientific knowledge base and a federal commitment to creating a great society. No public institution was more involved than education. Not only was education to be improved but schools themselves were to become the means or the vehicle for effecting much societal reform. Poverty, for example, was in the future to be reduced if not eliminated by adequately preparing all students for active participation as adults in the society; poverty in the present was to be alleviated in part by extending services such as medical, dental, nutritional, psychiatric, etc., to children who were in need through the schools as the institutions having access to them.

The schools were not to be unassisted in this reform effort. Behavioral and social scientists in increasing numbers were recruited to turn their attention to education. Scientific knowledge-based innovations were to be developed for use in schools. Assistance and incentives were given to schools who took action to improve their curriculum, instructional and/or management systems. When school personnel complained that the innovations developed by others did not address the problems they were confronting, strategies to help schools build their problem-solving capacities were developed with federal assistance. The schools then became the targets for change efforts as well as the means for effecting societal change.

Long range planning for school improvement is now emerging in a vastly changed climate. In some respects both the external incentives and optimistic

enthusiasm have lessened. It is a time of fiscal contraction and decreasing student enrollment. As several of the discussion leaders pointed out, it is also a time of diminished public confidence in public education. Perhaps the reform era left residual, unfulfilled expectations. Certainly the larger socio-cultural-economic context is different from the earlier reform era. But there is another notable change. The focal point has shifted. School districts are being encouraged to undertake their own planning to improve outcomes desired by their own community and to begin from a better knowledge base of the present state of affairs. While it may be argued that in the previous era, schools or school districts were encouraged to adopt innovations that suited their needs, more attention was given to the innovation than the need. Many of the innovations were broad in scope and internally integrated. Curricular innovations included instructional strategies and management systems, which often involved changes in the role of the teacher. These innovations were to be adapted to the site. LRPSI begins with the site, its constituents, and an analysis of its needs with changes sought at whatever level seems relevant.

The Conference Processes

Before examining the specifics of the discussions themselves, some comment on the general processes from a knowledge use perspective are in order. LRPSI involves assessing the current state of affairs, collectively deciding which outcomes the district would like to improve and what changes might be introduced as a means to that improvement. These three are intricately interwoven and involve creating shared constructions of reality.²

Assessing the current state of affairs involves constructing the reality of the present; selecting outcomes to be improved involves constructing images

²For discussion of reality as constructed, see Holzner, (1968) and Berger and Luckmann, (1967).

of the future; deciding on the means to effect improvement involves selective constructions of the past, integrated with the present to bring about the future through purposive action. These are "reality constructions" because we cannot grasp reality itself. We make selected observations or use observations already made (data). The observations or data do not speak for themselves. We interpret them or impose order and meaning on them. This is a cognitive process which is influenced by the person's frame of reference. The collectivity involved in LRPSI may comprise a number of "stakeholder" groups. A stakeholder group is a class of persons with seemingly similar relationships to the phenomena under consideration, such as teachers, administrators, parents, etc. While one might expect members of stakeholder groups to have similar concerns and to focus their attention accordingly, the assumptions that members bring to the situation and the attributes they attend to may vary considerably (Dunn and Dukes, 1981). In discussing the current state of affairs, persons offer knowledge claims based on their assumptions, data considered and arranged into some meaningful configuration. People may disagree or agree, add their claims in contention or reinforcement (Dunn, 1981). The process is one of attempting to come to some shared construction that is acceptable as a basis for further action. The same type of effort occurs in envisioning future states of affairs to decide on what outcomes could be improved and in deciding how to effect desired futures. Technical assistance may be sought to broaden the experiential base, to bring in additional data or additional interpretations.

The conference discussion leaders served as technical assistants, not to engage in constructions of reality for each school district and their own plans but to assist in constructing reality about LRPSI itself.

While such group discussions, whether they are about LRPSI as process or about a specific plan, allow knowledge transacting, they do not necessarily

lead to complete consensus. They do allow underlying assumptions to be surfaced and knowledge claims to be put forth for consideration. The very act of participation can generate commitment and lead to collective agreement although some enlightened compromises must sometimes be made.

The Discussions of Leaders from a Knowledge Use Perspective

Each discussion leader selected some area of concern with respect to LRPSI in order to share their thoughts and experiences. In doing so, they broadened the experiential base, encouraged reflectivity and sensitized participants to issues that they have been concerned with or that they have perceived as of concern to the districts they have been involved in helping. Each discussion leader's paper will be examined, supplemented by observations made during the conference proceedings.

Charles Gorman discussed registration as a ritual. In doing so he surfaced concerns about LRPSI that he had encountered in working with schools, put forth knowledge claims from research on school improvement, attempted and offered a recommendation. The recommendation is to relate evaluation of what is occurring in schools with respect to effecting long range plans to registration. In so doing, registration becomes a public-informing vehicle that could increase public confidence and not a meaningless ritual merely to comply with state guidelines.

Gorman from his experience in working with school personnel is aware that many educators are skeptical of any significant change resulting from state-directed planning. If the underlying assumption is that planning is forecasting a future that is unlikely to be realized, then compliance becomes an empty exercise to be lived through. Gorman points out that sustaining stability as well as working toward improvement can be involved in long term plans. Planning can be a stimulus to observation and reflectivity, not merely

an attempt to achieve specific outcomes to be evaluated. It can provide access to the public of what is occurring in their schools, thereby increasing awareness, commitment and confidence. The intention of LRPSI is not the acceptance and maintenance of the status quo, however, but is to work systematically toward improvement. In his discussion, Gorman is formulating a problem and proposing a solution that needs to be tested. The problem formulation is being shared as a way of manifesting concerns that might otherwise remain latent and be concealed in ritualistic compliance but no real gain in improvement nor public confidence. Having formulated the problem, Gorman offers a solution which reflects knowledge gained through both research and experience. Such solutions cannot be logically deduced from research findings. They require the integration of various knowledge claims and should be treated as recommendations that must be tested and further researched. Gorman has brought together in his proposal two dominant concerns--how can we improve our schools and increase public confidence--and illustrated how these might be concomitantly addressed by linking registration and evaluation.

James Burk focused attention on the context in which LRPSI is taking place. He presented demographic data and demographic projections to illustrate that planning must consider the decline in student enrollment. The decrease in the number of students at the school district level reduces the cost effectiveness of many activities, instructional and managerial. Long range plans at the school and district level will be constrained by the decrease in students served and the economic limitations.

By focusing attention on this larger context that is affecting most schools, Burk increases the knowledge base to be considered as LRPSI is undertaken. He also supplies data that opens the possibility of alternative ways to lessen the constraints decreasing enrollment otherwise imposes. Some activities may be

possible or their per student cost reduced if school districts collaborate at the area level. He cites various managerial and instructional programs that have been handled at the area level which would have been impossible or inefficient use of scarce resources at the district level.

Burk is well aware of the concern for maintaining control at the district level and the fear that creating collaborative area units may diminish the district's control over their own activities. By offering the experience others have had in creating area facilities and cooperative management for economics of scale, he points out that districts need not be subsumed under these larger units. If LRPSI takes into consideration what improvements can be made at the district level and what improvements can be made at an inter-district level, districts can retain control over what their community wants and how it can most feasibly and effectively be accomplished. The larger area unit will then be comprised of districts collaborating on specific undertakings and will not supplant the districts themselves as the unit of planning and responsibility.

In provided demographic data and the experiences of other districts which have collaborated at the area level, Burk sensitizes participants to the context that otherwise might negatively affect their schools and their long term plans. Awareness of these trends allows a proactive planning stance rather than coping when the effects are felt.

DeFlaminis and Nicely recommended to participants that they view LRPSI processes from a holistic perspective. The various steps proposed in the guidelines are not independent and linear but must be recognized as intricately interwoven. Future visions of achievement cannot be separated from both the current state of affairs and the available means to effect them. DeFlaminis and Nicely note that too often the plans are drawn up too hastily and may indeed

be unfeasible or result in unintended consequences. Careful thought must be given not only to the targets of improvement efforts but to the most appropriate, cost effective and workable means. How the processes are to be monitored and evaluated must also be considered to ensure that progress is being made in the intended directions. They raise the issues that the guidelines may tend to restrict attention to curriculum change but point out that instructional strategies or changes in management may effect the desired improvements most effectively and efficiently. Staff development rather than changes in curriculum material may be more productive in some cases. Strategies, for example, to increase the feedback to teachers and their diagnostic skills may lead to more effective prescriptions in any content or skill area.

Actually effecting the change can only be done by the district personnel involved. It is critical therefore that all persons be involved in, committed to and knowledgeable about the plans, intentions and means. DeFlaminis and Nicely recognize the tension between commitment on the part of an external technical assistant and the dwindling resources of his/her supporting organization. While both they and Walter recommend continuity of relationships between the district and the technical assistants, they sensitize participants to slightly different issues. The former advise technical assistants not to promise more than they can deliver and to fulfill any commitments made; the latter suggests that since all technical assistants are likely to be overloaded, necessary skills unevenly distributed, a technical assistant can help the district identify particular assistants capable of helping them. This assumes that the first technical assistant would be aware of the skills and competencies that persons in the I.H.E.'s or I.U.'s have, could match a particular school need to a particular individual and therefore make a recommendation. It is quite probable that potential technical assistants or subsets of them

do get to know one another's skills and orientations through conferences such as this, shared professional associations and collaboration with school districts. They may be members of each other's sociocognitive network, that is, persons who interact with each other directly or indirectly through writing and who share and mutually influence each others cognitions. When there are multiple technical assistants from one or more organizations, discussants agreed that collaboration and a division of labor must be worked out. At the common sense level, this is necessary so that redundancies are eliminated and conflicts avoided. From a knowledge use perspective, it is important that the technical assistants have a shared perception of what the district wants to accomplish and the assistance needed so that the results of the division of labor converge in the LRPSI process. The discussants also agreed that continuity of technical assistant, school district relationships be maintained. The rationale for continuity was not raised. It perhaps reflects their own experiences in working with school districts. While some technical assistants may interact and participate in the overall planning processes so that they share reality constructions with the district, other technical assistants might be called upon for very specific and intermittent help. Continuity with the former may be desirable because the assistance is more diffuse and of multiple type. They may indeed identify specifically competent persons to help with clearly articulated and bounded tasks. Walter focused her attention on management planning where technical assistance may be needed although that need is not always recognized. Certainly management planning must consider budgetary resources and the costs of effecting the improvement. All of the component but interrelated tasks such as the selection and introduction of new materials or strategies, professional development, evaluation must be managed and reconciled with budget allocations. Technical assistance

may be needed to collect or interpret data.

Wallace suggested the need for strong instructional leadership by administrators in the current context of reduced resources and public confidence. Based on research as well as his experiences as an administrative leader, Wallace recommended that participants perceive school improvement as a change process that involves people and not merely materials or strategies. It is a developmental process in which people's concepts as well as behaviors or activities may change. Sensitivity should be shown to the concerns of the people whose concepts or behavior may be altered. Unless their concerns, latent or expressed, are attended to and social support given, the chances of effective use of new procedures, knowledge, technology, etc. may be diminished.

Many past efforts and much of the research on planned change focused attention on an innovation treated as a packageable product that could be disseminated in toto. Technical assistance was equated with a linking or change agent whose task it was to help school personnel learn how to use the innovation in their classrooms. It was as though whatever had been the knowledge-in-use materials and activities that had been used would be replaced by the innovation. Preservice workshops and in service assistance were innovation focused rather than people focused. Wallace stressed the need for more attention to people, to their concerns and to their developmental processes. He cites research findings that indicated various concerns that people have that, unless alleviated, prevent the improvement of student outcomes from occurring. In doing so Wallace was increasing the knowledge base available to administrative leaders as they follow through on LRPSI. Recognizing that changes oriented toward school improvement require diagnostic and prescriptive skills, not merely administration, Wallace argued that school administrators must take on this

leadership function. Evaluation must be formative and linked to faculty development before summative evaluation takes place to compare outcomes obtained with prior accomplishments.

Staff development becomes an extremely important issue in times of scarce resources. Improvement in school outcomes may be more cost-effectively accomplished through the use of new theories or knowledge to which staff are introduced. Change need not always require new materials or technology. This more direct use of knowledge puts our understanding of knowledge use processes in the forefront of concern. Indeed it may be argued that the restriction in funds available directs attention to the very issue of the people involved and their cognitive processes which had been formerly neglected or underresearched.

Whether we are examining an LRPSI conference at which knowledge claims are being put forth for the consideration of administrators and technical assistants or the LRPSI processes occurring in schools, it is helpful to recognize these as occasions of knowledge use. Knowledge is not simply transmitted or transferred from a producer or disseminator and then used by recipients. Knowledge is mediated by frames of reference. As knowledge claims are put forth or encountered (as, for example, through reading), meaning and significance is imputed to them by the user. The potential user has an array of constructs, which are patterned to form orientations, assumptions and relationships among constructs that allow the user to assess and make sense of the knowledge claim. Frames of reference come into play as people assess a knowledge claim in terms of its relevance to them. If relevant, is the claim convincing and is it adequate for use? These processes are so much a part of our everyday interaction with others that we are not necessarily consciously aware or reflective of these cognitive activities. More awareness and explicit attention to these processes on the part of those who assume leadership

or technical assistance roles in LRPSI can increase our understanding of the improvement process.

The concerns that Wallace suggest we should be sensitive to result from assumptions and meanings people impute to the knowledge they are asked to use. These will differ among individuals although to some extent frames of reference are influenced by a person's location in social structure and perception of his or her responsibilities (Holzner and Salmon-Cox, 1982). We might, for example, expect that the frames of reference of School Board members will orient them toward the cost of introducing change and the acceptance or fit between the change and the expectations of their constituents. Teachers are less likely to use economic constructs in assessing change, unless they think scarce resources could be expended in more desired ways, and are more likely to assess it in terms of what affect it will have on their current practices and whether it fits with their knowledge-in-use. Teachers may be concerned with whether a change can be feasibly operationalized and what effect it will have on other activities.

Recognizing and being sensitive to these differences in frames of reference is critical to planning for improvement. This is so because shared constructions and commitments allow a division of labor such that task accomplishments converge rather than diverge or conflict as the course of future action is engaged upon. Greater awareness of improvement efforts has the potential for increasing public confidence in their schools.

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